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# General Interviewer Techniques: Developing Evidence-Based Practices for Standardized Interviewing

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# **General Interviewing Techniques**

**Developing  
Evidence-Based Interviewing Techniques  
for the Standardized Interview**

Interviewers and Their Effects from a Total Survey Error Perspective Workshop  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
26-28 February 2019

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# General Interviewing Techniques: Developing Evidence-Based Practices for Standardized Interviewing

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Interviewers and Their Effects from a Total Survey Error Perspective Workshop

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## Why revisit interviewing techniques?

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- Recordings now available
- Interaction coding has labeled actions and features of actions
- Influence of response format (aka question form)
- Advances in analytic capabilities

## Goals

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- General goals
  - Balance traditional needs of standardization against other goals
  - Make reasons for decisions explicit
- Incorporate research
  - Influence of question form
  - Interviewing “style”
  - Conversational practices
- Fill gaps for interviewers and quality control monitors
  - Requires new vocabulary to clarify distinctions
  - Crystallizes specific issues (e.g., importance of instrument conventions)

## Criteria considered in revising interviewing techniques

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- Criteria
  - Need
  - Ease of training
  - Criteria for quality control and monitoring
  - Rapport and motivation
  - Efficient progress and reducing burden
  - Training the respondent
  - Instrument support
  - Reliability
  - Validity
- Research is uneven for these criteria
- Weighting of criteria varies across decisions

# Evidence-Based Training: Key Structuring Concepts

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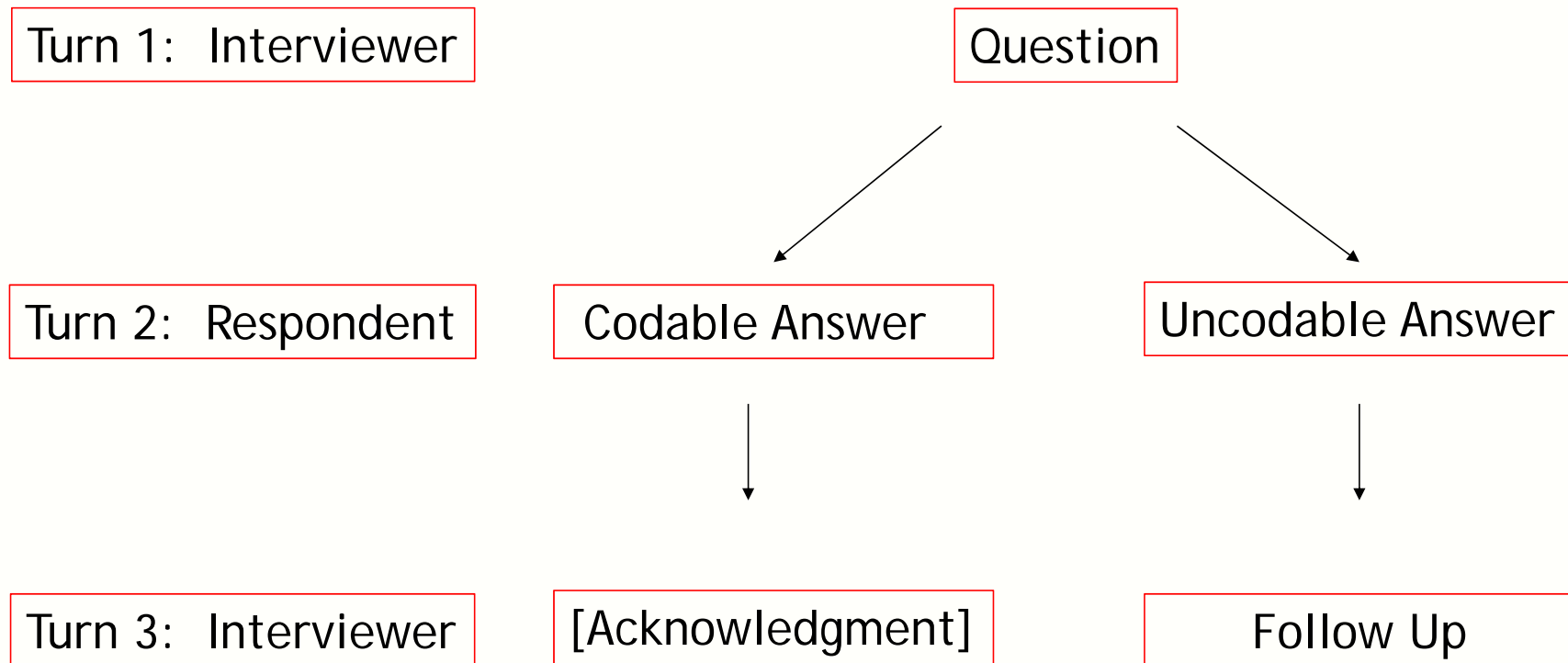
## Evidence-based training: Key structuring concepts

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- Question-answer sequence

## Question-answer sequence

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# Outline of training in interviewing techniques

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## Part 1. Introduction

- Lesson 1 Introduction
- Lesson 2 The Science of Survey Research

## Part 2. The Question-Answer Sequence

- Lesson 3 Question Reading Turn 1
- Lesson 4 Question Form
- Lesson 5 How to Recognize a Codable Answer Turn 2
- Lesson 6 Acknowledgments Turn 3

## Part 3. Advanced Techniques

- Lesson 7 Follow-up: Basic Techniques
- Lesson 8 Follow-up: Advanced Techniques
- Lesson 9 The Respondent Says "Don't Know" or Refuses
- Lesson 10 The Respondent Asks a Question: Requests for Repetition and Clarification
- Lesson 11 Training the Respondent

## Part 4. Special Topics

- Lesson 12 Choice Lists, Open Questions, and Field Coding
- Lesson 13 Interviewer Instructions
- Lesson 14 Groups of Questions: Filter-follow-up, Yes-No Checklists, Batteries, and Rosters

## Key structuring concepts

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- Question-answer sequence
- Response format (question form)
  - The type of answer projected by the question

## Response format: Yes-no

---

Do you feel you have ever been treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity?

<1> YES  
<2> NO

Yes-No

In general, would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

<1> EXCELLENT  
<2> VERY GOOD  
<3> GOOD  
<4> FAIR  
<5> POOR

Selection: Ordered Categories

During the past week, on about how many days did you have at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage such as beer, wine, a malt beverage, or liquor?

\_\_\_ NUMBER OF DAYS (0-7)

Discrete Value

## Response format: Selection with ordered categories

---

Do you feel you have ever been treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity?

<1> YES

<2> NO

Yes-No Response Format

In general, would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

<1> EXCELLENT

<2> VERY GOOD

<3> GOOD

<4> FAIR

<5> POOR

Selection: Ordered Categories

During the past week, on about how many days did you have at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage such as beer, wine, a malt beverage, or liquor?

\_\_\_ NUMBER OF DAYS (0-7)

Discrete Value

## Response format: Discrete value

---

Do you feel you have ever been treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity?

<1> YES

<2> NO

Yes-No Response Format

In general, would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

<1> EXCELLENT

<2> VERY GOOD

<3> GOOD

<4> FAIR

<5> POOR

Selection: Ordered Categories

During the past week, on about how many days did you have at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage such as beer, wine, a malt beverage, or liquor?

\_\_\_ NUMBER OF DAYS (0-7)

Discrete Value Response Format

## Common forms of survey questions: Selection with choice list

- Yes-no questions
- Selection questions
  - Ordered categories
  - Choice list
- Discrete-value questions

New vocabulary to use in training  
Can also be used with clients and researchers

**Which of these is the most important problem facing this country at present: Food and energy shortages, crime and violence, inflation, unemployment, or decreased trust in government?**

- <1> FOOD AND ENERGY SHORTAGES**
- <2> CRIME AND VIOLENCE**
- <3> INFLATION**
- <4> UNEMPLOYMENT**
- <5> DECREASED TRUST IN GOVERNMENT**





## Key structuring concepts

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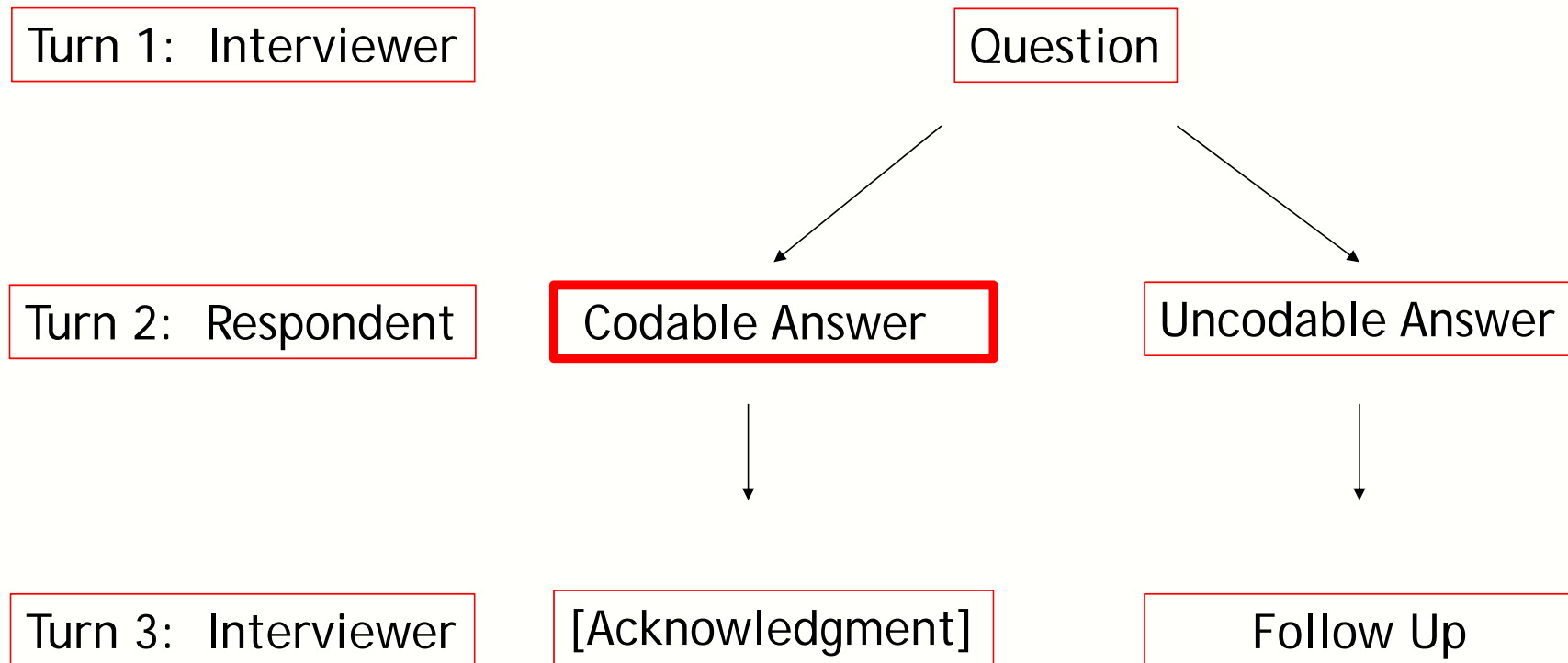
- Question-answer sequence
- Response format (question form)
- Codable and uncodable answers

## Turn 2: Codable and Uncodable Answers

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## Question-answer sequence

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Response Format/Question Form				
Conversational Element	Selection			
	Yes-No	Ordered Categories	Choice List	Discrete Value
[None]				
Delay or other particles or tokens				
Repetition of exact match (or synonym)				
Confirming or negating token				
Repetition of part of question				
Modifiers - Certainty				

Response Format/Question Form				
Conversational Element	Selection			
	Yes-No	Ordered Categories	Choice List	Discrete Value
[None]				
Delay or other particles or tokens				
Repetition of exact match (or synonym)				
Confirming or negating token				
Repetition of part of question				
Modifiers - Certainty				

Conversational Element	Response Format/Question Form
	Yes-No
[None]	"yes" or "no" [19, 36]
Delay or other particles or tokens	"um no" [26.1] "uh no I haven't" [42]
Repetition of exact match (or synonym)	"for pay no uh-uh" [84]
Confirming or negating token	"uh no I haven't" [42] "no, i haven't had that problem, no" [54] "yes I did" [43] "for pay no uh-uh" [84]
Repetition of part of question	"yes yes i would say yes" [55] "no no" [56], "yeah yeah" [160]
Modifiers - Certainty	"oh yes definitely" [161]

Conversational Element	Yes-No	Selection Ordered Categories	Selection Choice List	Discrete Value
[None]	"yes" or "no" [19, 36]	"not very willing" [59]. "stop" [12]	"hospital" [159]	"four" [58]
Delay or other particles or tokens	"um no" [26.1] "uh no I haven't" [42]	"oh I would favor it somewhat" [35]	"well at home" [130], "huh home" [11.1], "er at home" [149]	"oh, none at all" [61], "oh (mumble) oh just let's say fifty thousand dollars" [81]
Confirming or negating token	"for pay no uh-uh" [84]	"right I agree" [160]	"uh if there's no chance of recovery just no stop" [153], "no stop" [154]	"um yes, just probably about twice this week" [76]
Repetition of part of question	"uh no I haven't" [42], "no, i haven't had that problem, no" [54], "yes I did" [43], "for pay no uh-uh" [84]	"oh I would favor it somewhat" [35]	"this is my first marriage, my only marriage." [63], "hopefully at home" [131], "in my home I hope" [132]	
Repetition of exact match (or synonym)	"yes yes i would say yes" [55], "no no" [56], "yeah yeah" [160]		"hos home home" [152]	
Modifiers - Certainty	"oh yes definitely" [161]	"absolutely stop" [162]	"well I certainly would like to be at home which" [142]	"oh, none at all" [61]

## A codable answer

- Occurs after respondent has heard the question
- Answers the survey question
- Matches the response format of the question
  - One of the response categories
  - The format on the screen





## Defining a codable answer

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- Occurs after respondent has heard the question
- Answers the survey question
- Matches the response format of the question
  - One of the response categories
  - The format on the screen
- Disregards most conversational elements
  - Tokens
  - Repetitions of the answer
  - Certainty and uncertainty expressions (e.g., “about fifty”)
  - Elaborations that do not contradict the codable answer

Codable answer: Depends on response format

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- Yes-no questions
  - “Yes,” “no,” specific synonyms for “yes” or “no”
- Selection questions
  - One of the response categories read to the respondent
  - Unique portion of a response category
- Discrete-value questions
  - A specific, single number

## Codable answers and conversational practices: Selection questions

People like me don't have any say about what the government does. Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree?

- <1> STRONGLY AGREE
- <2> AGREE
- <3> NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE
- <4> DISAGREE
- <5> STRONGLY DISAGREE

☐

*Hmm, I guess neither*



## Codable answers and conversational practices: Selection questions

People like me don't have any say about what the government does. Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree?

<1> **STRONGLY** AGREE

<2> AGREE

<3> NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

<4> DISAGREE

<5> **STRONGLY** DISAGREE

☐

*Strongly*



## Conversational elements added to codable answers: Selection questions

People like me don't have any say about what the government does. Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree?

<1> STRONGLY AGREE

<2> AGREE

<3> NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

<4> DISAGREE

<5> STRONGLY DISAGREE

☐

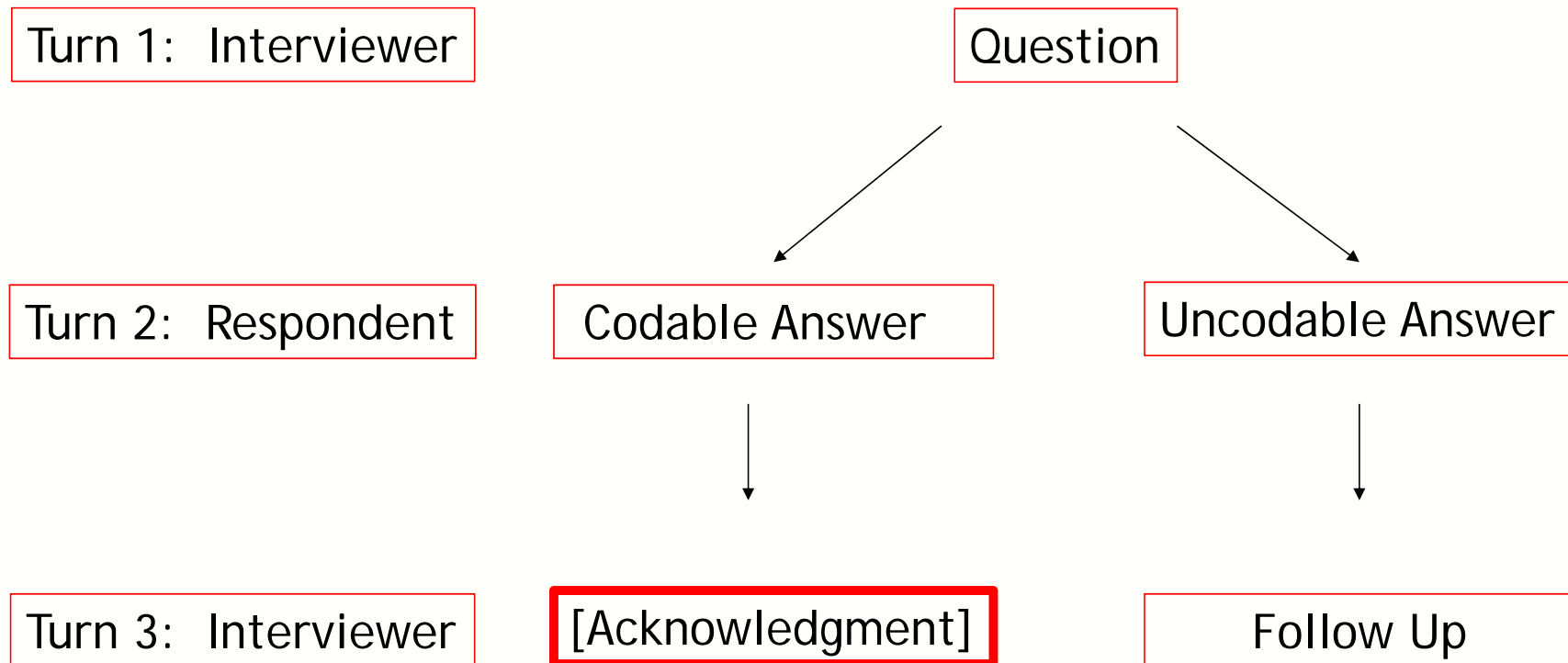
*Um, well, I could have more say if I wanted to, so I guess I disagree with that statement.*

## Turn 3: Acknowledgements

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## Question-answer sequence

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What “okay” is used for

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- Psychological view
- Conversational view



**FIGURE 7.1. A REMINDER TO STOP SAYING "OK"  
BETWEEN QUESTIONS.**



## Acknowledgments

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1 FR Well, I think give them an eight.

2 IV Okay. All right. And please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of these statements. The first statement is: People like me don't have any say about what the government does. Would you agree or disagree with that?

3 FR I agree, but, right, on the other hand I'm not intelligent enough to make all those decisions.

4 IV Oh.

5 FR And I've got enough about me to know that I don't want to do it. I don't that responsibility.

6 IV Okay. All right. And, how about this one: Government agencies usually try to do what is best for the people.

## Simple acknowledgment: “Thank you”

Now think about the last 12 months. Did you receive personal care for a period of one month or more from a family member or friend because of a health condition, illness, or disability?

<1> YES

<5>

*Hmm ... 12 months is a long time ...  
Let me think ... Yes.*

*Thank you.*

## Most common simple acknowledgments

*Thank you*

*Okay*

Repeating the respondent's codable answer

*Mmhmm*

*Uhhuh*

*I see*



## Most common response-specific acknowledgments

*Thank you for giving a single number*

*Thank you for selecting one of our answer categories*

*Thank you for giving an exact number*

*Thank you for thinking carefully about that*

*Thank you for thinking that through*

*Thank you for taking time to remember*

*I'm glad to hear that*

*I'm sorry to hear that*

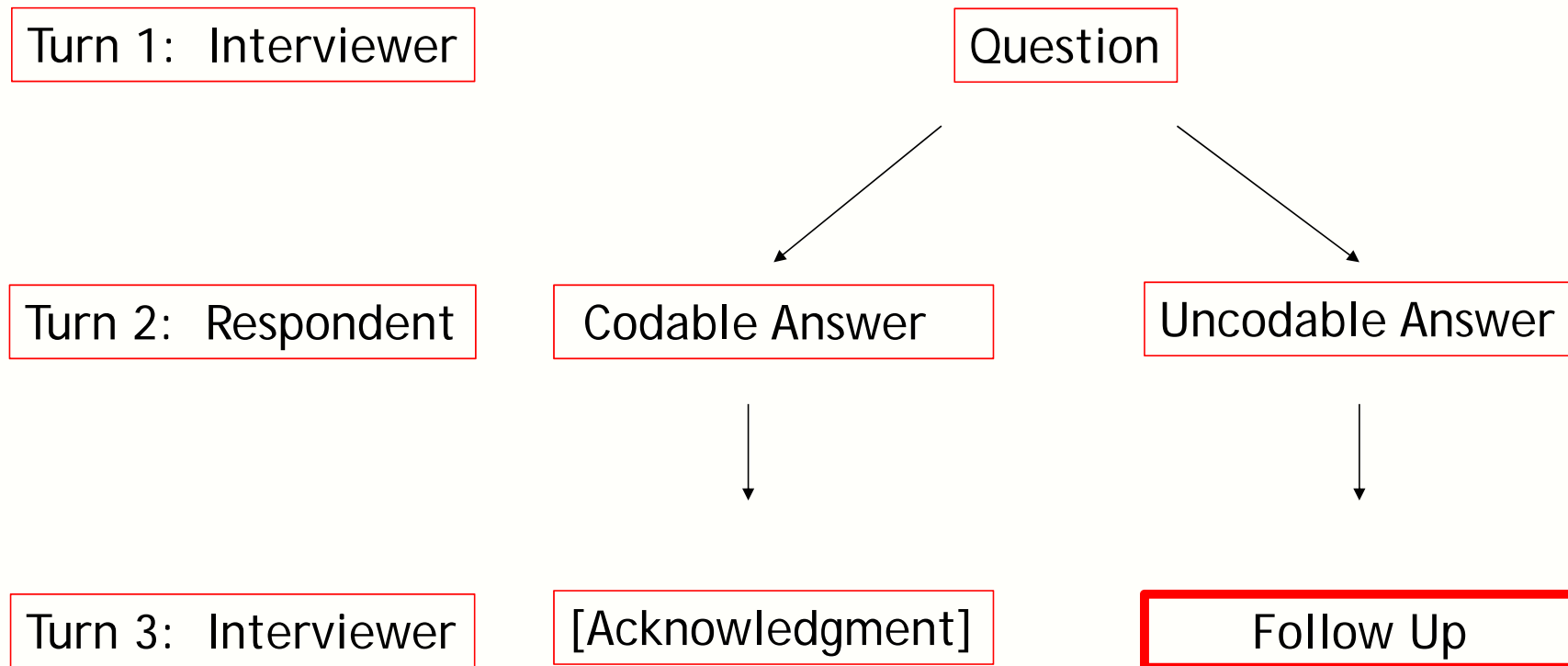


## Turn 3: Following Up an Uncodable Answer

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## Question-answer sequence

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## Follow-up after an uncodable answer: Alternatives

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- Repeating entire question
  - [+ response categories]
- Selection
  - Repeating all response categories
  - Ordered categories: Responsive follow-up or “Tuning”  
*So would you say somewhat happy, very happy, or extremely happy?*
- Yes-no questions
  - Balanced follow-up (= offering all response categories)  
*So would you say ‘yes’ or ‘no’?*
  - Responsive follow-up with confirmation  
*So you would say ‘yes,’ is that correct?*
- Discrete value
  - Offering metric  
*So how many days would you say?*
- Immediate coding



Logic of answers to yes-no questions	Elements in List Joined by...	
	"or"	"and"
Form of answer	[Has a doctor ever told you that you have...] How about a heart attack, coronary heart disease, angina, congestive heart failure, or other heart problems?	Example: Have you been able to bend, lift, jump, and run without difficulty and without help or equipment of any kind?
Kernel + single element	<p>Answer: "Yes, two heart attacks."</p> <p>Action: Immediate coding of kernel</p>	<p>Answer: "No, I can't jump."</p> <p>Action: Immediate coding of kernel</p>
Single positive element	<p>Answer: "Two heart attacks."</p> <p>Possible actions: Immediate coding, responsive confirmation follow-up, balanced follow-up, or reread question?</p>	<p>Answer: "I can jump."</p> <p>Possible actions: Reread question or balanced follow-up.</p>
Single negative element	<p>Answer: "Well, I haven't had a heart attack."</p> <p>Possible actions: Reread question or balanced follow-up.</p>	<p>Answer: "I can't jump"</p> <p>Possible actions: Immediate coding, responsive confirmation follow-up, balanced follow-up or reread question?</p>

## Selection questions with ordered categories: Tuning

---

*Q: How well does this person understand your preferences and plans for future medical treatment? Extremely well, somewhat well, not very well, or not at all?*

I      1      And how well does this person understand your preferences and plans for future medical treatment: Extremely well, somewhat well, not very well, or not at all?

R      2      Well

## Selection questions with ordered categories: Tuning

---

*Q: How well does this person understand your preferences and plans for future medical treatment? Extremely well, somewhat well, ~~not very well, or not at all?~~*

I      1      And how well does this person understand your preferences and plans for future medical treatment: Extremely well, somewhat well, not very well, or not at all?

R      2      Well

## Selection questions with ordered categories: Tuning

---

*Q: How well does this person understand your preferences and plans for future medical treatment? Extremely well, somewhat well, not very well, or not at all?*

I 1 And how well does this person understand your preferences and plans for future medical treatment: Extremely well, somewhat well, not very well, or not at all?

R 2 Well

I 3 Would you say extremely well or somewhat well?

R 4 hm extremely well

## Discussion

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## Discussion

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- Challenges
  - Require transcripts
  - Collections of transcripts vary in populations, training and monitoring regimes, question forms, and topics
- Gaps in knowledge are apparent
  - Almost no controlled experiments
  - Descriptive results better than none!
- Issues relevant in all types of research interviewing

# Acknowledgments

Developed by:



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